

6 Aug

NSC BRIEFING

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5 August 1953

INDOCHINA

There has not yet been any real improvement in the Indochina picture. In the military field, we can expect the Communist Viet Minh to resume large scale offensive operations by October with renewed vigor. These forces are being strengthened this summer by an increased Chinese Communist aid program.

Politically, relations between the Indochina states and France are in the process of a major change and are very confused at this time. The French have offered to grant sweeping concessions but their declarations are vague and the Indochinese are suspicious of them. No psychological uplift has been provided to rally native support to the war effort.

Following its invariable custom during the past seven years, the Viet Minh will undoubtedly attack the French this coming fall when the rains end. Viet Minh preparations for fighting in both Laos and Tonkin are already evident.

25X1C [REDACTED] it is stockpiling supplies in northern and central Laos. These supply depots are at strategic points along possible invasion routes. The enemy is also active there politically, trying to attract the local population to its cause.

The great part of Viet Minh regulars are now located in Tonkin and are improving roads and building up supply dumps.

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Some of these latter could be used against either Laos or the Tonkin delta or both at the same time.

Chinese deliveries to the Viet Minh this year have been at a rate roughly double that of last year. The number of trucks used has been greatly increased. New supply routes into Laos and Tonkin have been built and the old ones improved. The categories of arms have been broadened.

A Viet Minh advance further south in Laos would threaten Cambodia, would cause alarm over the security of Thailand and even the rest of Southeast Asia as happened last spring. But the critical area of conflict in the Indochina war will still be the Tonkin delta.

Several high French officials in Indochina believe the Viet Minh are capable of overrunning the delta if they are willing to accept the high rate of casualties that such a decisive battle would entail. The capacity of the French to meet a massive enemy assault is conditioned by several factors:

- (1) They lack adequate mobile reserves in the Tonkin delta; indeed they now have six less battalions than a year ago.
- (2) Viet Minh units have saturated the delta with infiltrated units and over half the population there is under their control.
- (3) New enemy techniques of sabotage have endangered the security of all forms of communication in

the delta, and has necessitated the assignment of increasing numbers of combat personnel to guard duties.

- (4) French defenses in Laos are weak and reinforcement of them would further deplete the delta troop strength.

General Navarre, the French commander, hopes to improve his position by adopting certain new measures. But most of these are still in the planning stage:

- (1) He wants to undertake local commando operations this summer to harass Viet Minh activities.
- (2) He wants to hit the Viet Minh first in September to forestall its planned offensive.
- (3) An end to static defense is being planned with heavy attacks on enemy flanks and its rear.
- (4) A changeover from battalion to divisional operations is intended.
- (5) An attempt is being made to organize a reserve of special mobile units for special tasks; this means abandonment of some isolated delta posts which are strategically useless.

Navarre's plans are largely dependent on additional troops from France. He has asked for about 20,000. But only half of

this number has been promised and they won't reach Indochina in time for the fall campaign.

The development of the Vietnamese Army, scheduled to provide 54 battalions by November, is progressing slowly; to date six battalions have been activated, and others are training. Some new battalions will be transfers from the French army and thus will not add to total strength. The new units, however, are not expected to contribute much this year. At best, they might be able to undertake some static defense duties.

The over-all balance of the forces might well be indicated by comparing the French decrease in strength in Tonkin by six battalions and the reported increase of Viet Minh strength there from six to seven divisions.

On the political side again, French offers to renegotiate relationships have evaded the basic question of the right to withdraw from the French Union. This point is very important in native eyes. It may prove to be a serious stumbling block to successful negotiations.

The vagueness of the French approach to new political relations reflects a split in the French cabinet. Foreign Minister Bidault heads those favoring minimum concessions and the solution of the Indochina problem by a Far East conference. Vice Premier Reynaud wants to grant full independence and perhaps enlarge American responsibility.

Public pressures in France for a solution in Indochina are mounting and are stimulated by the Korean truce. These demands appear to make little distinction between the outright withdrawal of French forces and some solution that would leave Indochina free from Communist control. But parliamentary support for negotiations with the Viet Minh, which would amount to virtual surrender, has not yet reached serious proportions. There is, nevertheless, some reason to believe that planning in Paris is on a short term basis with the hope that a few victories would put France in a more favorable position to make some sort of deal with Peiping or the Viet Minh.

Vietnam, where the eventual military decision will be reached, is far the most populous and the most important politically of the three Associated States. Its government is planning to negotiate the transfer of services still wholly or partly under French control. Bao Dai, now in France, feels that the tables are turned and that he is now in a position to grant concessions to the French in return for greater aid for the Vietnam Army.

Cambodia which by its demand for complete and immediate independence has recently taken the spotlight away from Vietnam has now agreed to negotiate with the French. The Cambodian king, meanwhile, is proceeding with a program to "mobilize the peasants" ostensibly as a means of refuting the French contention that Cambodia is not capable of defending itself

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against the Viet Minh. The French say, with some justification, that the recruiting program is directed against them more than against the Viet Minh.

Tension in Cambodia remains high, and a favorable outcome will depend on the king's ability to control the anti-French feeling he has helped foster, and on the French clarifying their position toward independence.

No date has been set for the beginning of negotiations between the French and Indochinese. The time has probably past when a dramatic announcement granting independence could rouse the native populations to support the war enthusiastically. The best that can probably be hoped for is an agreement which will nullify the Viet Minh's nationalistic appeal and end widespread cooperation with the Communists.

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